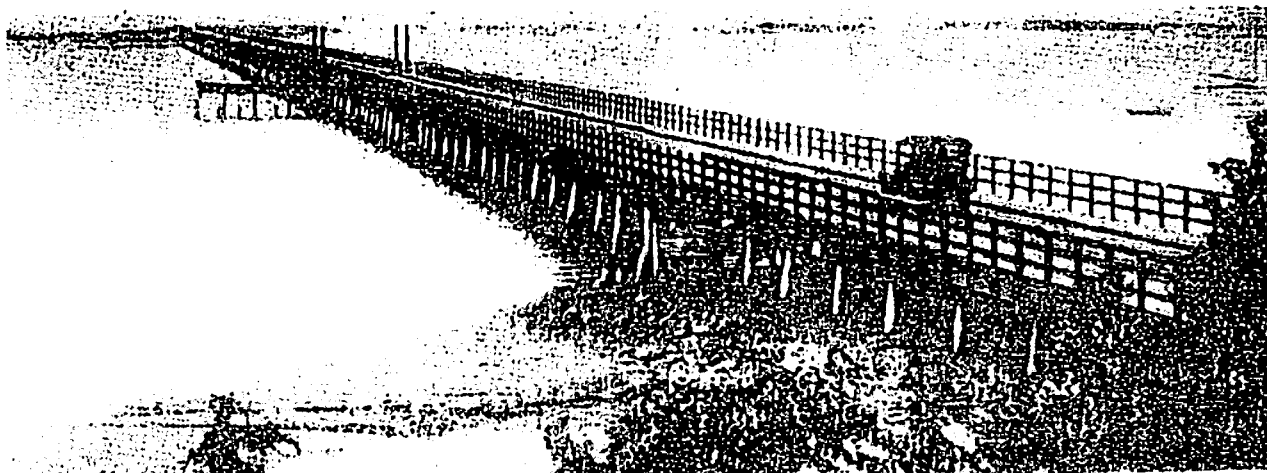


GURNET BRIDGE



Gurnet Bridge

Further Reflections on Gurnet Bridge

Updating a report of
Dec. 10, 1988

By the REV. CANON ROBERT E. MERRY

It was a hot summer Sunday afternoon and I was sitting on a lawn chair sipping a glass of ice tea as the guest of Harriet Nichols at the "lighthouse" that stands just off the eastern end of Gurnet Bridge. I was watching the slow-moving stream of cars crawling their way back to Powder Point after a swim or quiet walk down Duxbury Beach. What impressed me was not only the number of the cars, but the slowness of their movement. Obviously they were adhering closely to the newly required speed limit of 10 miles per hour enforced by the Duxbury Police cruiser I had noted parked just across the street from where I was sitting. I also knew he had a counterpart parked at the other end of the bridge, both with walkie-talkies. Drivers of these cars also knew this.

That slow speed impressed me because, although this was the required speed limit up to now, few motorists adhered to it and vehicles crossing the old bridge with its loose planks sounded like an approaching thunderstorm. This new slow speed was undoubtedly urged by police presence, but there was also something else. This was a brand new bridge... built of tropical hard wood and its beauty invited restraint. After all, the town had rejected state funding which would have built it a steel and concrete structure entirely out of keeping with Duxbury's traditions. Taxpayers of the town wanted to continue a wooden facility even if that meant they would have to foot the bill.

As I gazed at this column of rubber and steel and glass and shining paint snaking its way at a snail's pace, I couldn't help recalling another hot Sunday afternoon when Ed Baker and I broke off our sight-seeing of the thousands of cars from Brockton, Whitman and Rockland rolling down Washington St. and answered a fire call to Gurnet Bridge. Leaping onto the seat of the Brockway '23 fire truck waiting for just such an emergency in the number one fire house 100 yards down the hill, Ed gunned the engine for all it was worth and I grined away with all my might on the manually operated siren. The unmuffled engine roared away and we must have hit 40 miles an hour as we broached the western end of the bridge. Cars were allowed to park on the northern side of the bridge, and oncoming traffic made a squeeze of only 6 inches clearance. It was a hair-raising trip and one that was impossible to forget.

Other thoughts flooded my mind as I sat there. One recalled my fall Sunday trips by horse and open wagon to the gunning stands which were staked out on the beach with food and other supplies. No cars could drive on the beach then except at low tide on the hard pan left by the retreating waves. On one particular trip to the Hunt Club, just north of High Pines, on a freezing winter afternoon, my sister and I were invited into the club house for cocoa and donuts after we had unloaded our horse Prince who waited outside. He wearied of this and we couldn't blame him and walked on home. We emerged out into the darkened yard and there was no horse in sight. We had to walk all the way home, climbing up and down the dunes from telephone pole to telephone pole. Then there was the winter of 1918 when ice covered all of Duxbury Bay from Bug Light west to Clark's Island in the south. The ice encased the bridge

pilings so firmly that the action of the tide made a corkscrew out of the bridge and only a daredevil would dare to cross it. The frost that winter reached a depth of 5 feet and cut off the water supply to our horse barn so we had to water the horses from the granite trough donated by the then Rural Society in 1897. With the spring thaw an underground cave was washed out and one horse fell into it on her way to get hitched to the meat wagon and had to be dug out.

That was probably the winter that the boys of Powder Point School fashioned homemade ice sail boats as Elden Wadsworth reports, and sailed all over the bay. The accompanying photographs, given by Anna Millar, were probably taken in the winter of 1936 when I was away at my first parish in Wiscasset, ME. Postcards of that winter have been made showing ice cliffs 50 feet high on the outer beach. The photos of the drawbridge and the shelter on the dock at its side shows how tough a time the bridge had in almost every winter. It is easy to imagine what pressure was exerted by the ice as it was lifted and lowered by tidal action. The drawbridge was manually operated, which meant a mariner would have to rope his ship to the dock, climb the ladder to the bridge level, raise the draw, then push on through, and reverse the process on the other side. One day the draw collapsed and was never replaced.

Clipper readers know for the most part how the bridge building took place. It came about as a adjunct to the purchase and planned development of William Wright who had amassed a fortune in textiles, especially in providing uniforms for the soldiers of the Civil War, and had lavished some of this wealth to help the town. Wright had bought Duxbury Beach with the blessing of town meeting, which reflected the depression that had overtaken the town's economy with the end of the great ship building era. Wright's plan was to "develop the Beach," as we would say today, with the construction of 263 houses with surrounding lots. The bridge was to be an important component of this scheme. The special town meeting's resolution passed at the meeting of April 20, 1888, read as follows: "That the people of Duxbury regard with satisfaction the efforts of William Wright to utilize Duxbury Beach by offering the sale of 263 building lots and erecting private houses there. And therefore we would request the selectmen to expend the amount of money upon (necessary) roadmaking and otherwise as their judgement seems best." The vote for the bridge was close (65-45) and an effort was made at a special town meeting held April 17, 1890 to rescind this action but it failed and the bridge was built beginning in 1892 and completed and dedicated with a gala aquatic celebration in 1895.

Therefore there was opposition. Water transportation was the norm in and around Colonial Duxbury and Plymouth and this may help to explain the date of 1803 as the first bridge across Blue Fish River, built also with a draw and also of wood. This was to accommodate the hulls of ships shipped up river on their way to completion in the ways of Ezra Weston and other shipbuilders. The bridge wore out and was replaced by another wooden one built by Joshua Winsor for \$1,500. This bridge was replaced in 1881 by the stone one that stands today. But one can imagine the problem, faced by

the *Ford Enterprise* schooner and the *Boston Packet* that made regular trips in and out of Bourne's wharf. The timbers of that wharf can still be seen at the end of "Old Wharf Rd" marking the new Marshfield subdivision on the edge of the Great Marsh.

But Wright's plans for developing Duxbury Beach received 2 knockout blows in back-to-back blizzards of 1888 and 1889. The first one dropped 5 feet of snow on Boston and plunged the steamer *Portland* to a watery grave with the loss of all hands. The storm of 1889 did not bring as much snow, nor did it sink an ocean-going passenger liner, but when both storms finished the dunes of the beach had been lowered by at least 15 feet and Wright realized the damage that would have been done to his fragile summer cottages. Three houses had indeed been built a half-mile down the beach, but these were later towed by tugboat under Walter Prince's leadership to Landing Rd. off Bay Rd. where they still stand today.

It was a great time of bridging through telegraph or steel and stone as proven by the Atlantic-French Cable that had landed only a few years before in 1869, the same year that the trains met in Utah and thus spanned the continent, not to mention the Brooklyn Bridge completed in 1883. The statue of Liberty was a gift from our French friends carrying on the relationship begun by Lafayette. The pedestal was built by pennies from America's school children. It was a great time and life was expanding everywhere. Metternich's peace accomplished after the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 continued with British sea power and American capital keeping the peace for over a century, until World War I.

The bridge continued to be of use and with age maintenance problems became a factor and Plymouth County, Kingston and Marshfield and sometimes Pembroke shared in the expense. But the state legislature in 1939 asked Duxbury to bear the entire burden. Visitors to the beach began to experience hold-ups as highway crews labored long and hard to keep the structure safe and serviceable. At one point the bridge had to be closed for 2 1/2 years. In the years of 1976 and 1977 a total of \$375,000 was spent on repairs. Town meetings were scenes of conflict as the struggle went on and once a movement called BYOB (build your own bridge) got under way. Although noble, the efforts were all in vain. Finally, citizens running out of patience had reputable engineers do a study and come up with a figure to renovate the bridge, replacing at least 70 pilings. They gave us their figure of \$950,000 and that did it. To pour that amount of cash into an old - and constantly deteriorating bridge was unthinkable. So plans were made to replace Gurnet Bridge. Star players in this effort were Margaret Kearney and Abdul Hamadeh, an experienced civil engineer. Things began to move rapidly. Bids came in all around the figure of \$3 million, but citizens rose to the challenge and the necessary bond purchases were authorized. Tropical hardwood was chosen for the structure - pledged to outlast steel and concrete. Despite some objections alleging a corresponding destruction of tropical rain forests, fears were soon quieted with the obvious beauty and reliability this kind of wood promised. The cost of the original bridge was around \$30,000; one third of which was paid by William Wright, according to his promise despite the

abandonment of his plans for development; the other two thirds being shared by Duxbury, Kingston and Plymouth. This new bridge was Duxbury's sole responsibility and we like it that way with a single municipality looking after maintenance, police surveillance and payment on the mortgage.

But it was sad to part with the old bridge which had stood for almost a century, and had witnessed hundreds of episodes both good and bad. I once watched a man tease to landing a 20-pound bass fish, standing on the drawbridge dock. Thousands of fish had been caught from its railings. The old structure could tell many stories of the rum-running days from 1920 to 1930, when its pilings were foils to the Coast Guard trying to enforce prohibition. One night a fast Coast Guard patrol boat pursued a rum-runner as he circled the bay dumping overboard his 5-gallon cans of Belgian alcohol until there was none left and he surrendered. By this time the bay was frequently the scene of such cases. Once the Duxbury boat knowing the depth of marshlands at high tide led the Coast Guard boat over the marsh at Snug Harbor, grounding it so school children could see it on their way up Clapp's Hill. Hideaways for liquor were located all over the Back River marsh disguised as gunning shacks, so the old bridge shielded them from search and seizure.

So the Old Bridge died not with the dignity of a big bang or public ceremony but inch by inch, so to speak, as each of the ancient pilings was removed and replaced by a new one. Of course this was the way to go, and after a year it was completed and I was greatly honored to make the dedicatory prayer. It was pouring rain that Saturday morning, but a good crowd was on hand wearing boots and yellow slickers and carrying umbrellas. Speeches were made from the small shelter that Margaret had erected for just such a contingency. All

in all it was a gala occasion as we gathered at the western end of the bridge and walked the length of the bridge for the ceremony at the eastern end. It was a very lovely sensation as we walked, the rain pelting our faces but feeling under our feet a solid structure that would probably last another hundred years.

There was a final reflection that occurred to me many times, and not just there on the lawn of the lighthouse. It is in the form of a question: "Why would a town bind itself into a \$3,000,000 mortgage to construct this bridge when people got along without it for some centuries, and there were plenty of access points to water from the bay? In fact, there were 22 town landings with just this purpose in mind. The answer came when I had finished back-to-back essays on the location of these town landings, and I became very indignant at the discovery also made by a commission in 1975 that these town landings had diminished through disuse or simple waterfront owners moving onto them, cutting them down to about 8. And the answer came loud and clear: with access to Duxbury Beach provided by a safe and beautiful bridge and cars available with parking privileges who needs all these landings? Those who can afford them have swimming pools so they are free of tidal worries, and all the others can reach the beach by car very easily. So I saw the Beach as Duxbury's number 1 recreational area, and despite the damage done by recent storms, our number 1 leisure asset. Towns people saw the Beach and the bridge as essential items in the life of

the town; without them their life would be greatly diminished, and this is why they were willing to undertake the obligation of building it and policing it and maintaining it, and this is also why they drive so slowly as they go and come. They know it is theirs to use and enjoy and take the precautions to preserve it for the future.

Notes on the Bridge

(The following excerpt from the Boston Herald in 1892 is an account of the opening of "Gurnet Bridge". "Duxbury rejoices today at the completion of several years work," the caption read. -- Ed.)

The bridge was projected a number of years ago when Hon. Stephen M. Allen and others endeavored to secure the necessary funds by private subscription. The attempt was unsuccessful and the project slumbered.

Two years ago the plan was brought into prominence again, and the Plymouth County commissioners were petitioned to lay out a highway and bridge from Powder Point to Gurnet Beach, across Duxbury Bay. There was strong opposition to the plan from conservative residents, but the bridge party finally triumphed, and work began last December. William A. Kenrick & Sons of East Boston being the contractors.

The structure is 2200 feet long and is built on piling, with a draw near the center where the channel is situated. Its cost was about \$3,000 of which one third was assessed in Duxbury, the balance being assessed to Kingston, Plymouth, and the

Gurnet Beach is a long narrow slip of white quartz sand which extends southeasterly from Green Harbor, Marshfield, for almost 7 miles ending at the high promontory of the Gurnet at the entrance of Plymouth Harbor. A mile or so of the beach is in Marshfield, and the promontory is in Plymouth, while the intervening station belongs to this town, but it formerly took 8 miles of travel by a road which traverses Marshfield to reach it. The bridge cuts this long trip down to less than half a mile.

Duxbury is a great place of summer resort and the demand for shore property is heavy. The bridge throws several miles of desirable property into the market, and gives good communication with the railroad.

The program for today's celebration includes a parade by William Wadsworth post 165 G.A.R. and Mattakeeset lodge of Odd Fellows, headed by the Plymouth band and accompanied by a large number of invited guests and visiting organizations. Congressman Morse, Capt. J.G.B. Adams and Secretary of State Olin will be present. A regatta will be sailed off Powder Point and the bridge opening ceremonies will take place on the structure. A clambake and speeches will follow.